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ISABEL HILTON: IN SEARCH FOR A GREEN GLOBAL DIALOGUE

by Doris Obermair

Isabel Hilton is London based international journalist and broadcaster. She has an MA in Chinese from Edinburgh University and went to China in 1973 where she studied for two years at the Beijing Foreign Language and Culture University, Fudan University in Shanghai. As a journalist she has worked with Scottish Television, the Daily Express, the Sunday Times and The Independent. In 1992 she became a presenter of the BBC's flagship news programme, The World Tonight and a columnist for The Guardian. In 1999 she joined the New Yorker as a staff writer. Her work has appeared in the Financial Times, the New York Times, the Los Angeles Times, Granta, the New Statesman, El Pais, Index on Censorship and many other publications. She has reported from China, Latin America, Africa, the Middle East and Europe and has written and presented several documentaries for BBC television. Since 2001 she has been a presenter of the BBC Radio Three's cultural programme, Night Waves. She has authored and co-authored several books. For "if..." she talks about her latest project www.chinadialogue.net. The world's first fully bilingual website devoted to the environment and the aim to promote direct dialogue between China and the world, searching for solutions to our shared environmental challenges.

by Doris Obermair

Question: As a journalist you have been working all over the world. But when and where did your relationship with China start?

Answer: It started in Cincinnati, Ohio when I was seventeen. I had a scholarship between school and university and I had a year to spend in Cincinnati. There, I actually felt a bit bored academically; so I start to teach myself Chinese, just out of interest. I did that for a year. Then I came back to the UK, to Edinburgh to read French and Spanish and it happened that they had just started a Chinese department at my university. I was convinced that I would not get very far with Chinese on my own so I dropped French and Spanish and started to do Chinese. After that, I did a post-graduate work in literature and in 1973 I went to China for two years, again on a scholarship for literature. But I arrived shortly after the Cultural Revolution and all literature had been pretty much banned. [*Though Mao himself officially declared the Cultural Revolution to have ended in 1969, the term is today widely used to also include the period between 1969 and the arrest of the "Gang of Four" in 1976*]. So I had an interesting time in China but I didn't get to far with my literature studies.

Q: How can we imagine the China of 1973?

A: Politically, Mao was still alive and the "Gang of Four" (*The group consisted of Mao's widow Jiang Qing and three of her close associates, Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyan, and Wang Hongwen*) was pretty much in charge of the state. Everything was tightly controlled, everybody wore the same cloths, very quiet, very repressed. People were very afraid, they had just been through some very dramatic years. It was hard to get into China that time, very few Chinese travelled, and there were very few foreigners on the ground. When there was a foreigner on the street, a large crowd would gather around you out of curiosity, but at the same time they would be really afraid to speak to you. That were very different times and China changed a great deal since then. There was very little foreign news, the only foreign news on television was from North Korea!

Q: How did that experience influence your professional career?

A: It helped, because it's difficult to get into journalism in the UK. But very little foreigners had really spent time in China apart from the diplomatic corps. So when I came back I was in demand! I started as a television journalist, then switched to newspapers, then doing pretty much a mixture of television, radio and newspaper. I did not get back to China; by then, China

was a difficult place to report. I covered Latin America, Europe, South Asia, doing a lot of international reporting. But China remained a profound interest. And then China started to change and it was more and more interesting and accessible. I have been following those years of changes closely.

Q: What was your motivation to get so deeply involved into environmental issues and launch this digital dialogue project?

A: It seemed to me that the Internet will set the possibility of a much wider dialogue with China than mere business to business or government to government exchanges. Although China was opening up, China was not really in conversation with the world in the way the Internet allows people all over the world to be in conversation. This is partly a language issue and it's also partly due to the control of the Internet the Chinese government excesses for communication into and out of China. And it seems to me, as China rises it becomes an important global player, it is very important to establish a real dialogue. So thinking this through it seemed to me that one should address the language and cultural barrier by trying to set up a bilingual website where people who did not speak Chinese or Chinese who did not speak English could communicate with each other on issues of common concern. And the **most important issue of common concern for all of us is climate change**. China's economic rise has created an environmental catastrophe in the making and China's margin of error on environmental issues is very very narrow.

Q: The margin of error is so narrow because...

A: Well, partly because of the moment in history we have reached on these issues and partly because **China is a large country with a very fragile environment**. What China does on the environment and on climate change concerns all of us because of the size of the country. And it seemed to me if there is one issue we must discuss, we can discuss and that would benefit from the discussion in the sense that we could construct a platform for a common point of view and in the search of common conclusions, than climate change and the environment was it!

Q: How did you start to implement the idea?

A: We set about raising the money for a nine month pilot and we set about to meet the considerable technical challenges of running a fully bilingual website. We set about also **talking to people in China about what the limits of such a discussion** were because it's **important to keep this site accessible in China** and obviously the Chinese government has a point of view on that.

Q: Who are the people in China you want to get involved to participate in the dialogue on the environment and climate change? I suppose you tried to invite people from the non-government spheres...

A: Yes, government-to-government exchange exists and you don't really need something like chinadialogue.net to produce an import of foreign experts into China. But what you don't have is a wider engagement. If you think about politics and climate change for a minute, the politics for climate change are complex. The government know that they ought to act but they haven't really succeeded in convincing the electrics till now that this is an urgent and serious issue that demands concentrated action. This is true for China but also for West. So, I was looking for the way to establish this dialogue amongst academics, amongst experts, amongst interested parties, people like you and I who are concerned about climate change and who want to know what China is doing about it, what people in China feel about it, what young people think about it, what schools, universities or NGOs are doing. A lot of people in the West don't know that there are NGO's in China, let alone know what they are doing. And NGOs in China have very little direct contact with counterparts outside China.

Q: What are the things you like to see happen on chinadialogue.net?

A: Let's say for example an Indian environmental expert and a Chinese environmental expert share experiences or experts debating whether **"green GDP" is a sensitive way of measuring economic impact of environmental damage** or how you address water crisis in Europe and how you address water crisis in China. What can China learn from California on

energy saving, you know all these issues where people just don't know enough about each others experiences; these are issues we are facing all over the world – all that is what I want to be happening on chinadialogue.net. There has to be some benefit from an exchange. I think there is a risk that climate change and the challenges it faces could be seen through a national lens. But we need to try to see that through an international lens.

Q: Well, thinking about one of the last mega projects in China, the “Three Gorges Dam” on the Yangtze River that relocated about 1.3 million people, wasn't that the latest example of giving economic progress priority to environmental concerns? Do you really image in free discussion about that on chinadialogue.net, in Chinese and accessible from China?

A: Well there has been a lively debate in China over the “Three Gorges Dam” (TGD) and there has been a lot of reporting of the issues around relocation (*of the expropriated population*). And the TGD is just the latest project in 2000 years of hydrology projects in China, it is on of the biggest dam builder in the world and has been grabbling with its water issues for a very long time. But if you look what some Chinese writers and intellectuals write about the water issues in China you find that this is a very long running discussion that goes way back through history. **But the question for energy is relatively new and the question about China's energy need is very urgent.** Whether the TGD is the answer to it is rigorously debated in China. What is clear is that China has energy need and they are legitimate energy needs! A variety of solutions are going to have to be employed to meet them.

Q: So apart from academics and environmental experts, who else will find an interesting platform on chinadialogue.net?

A: Well, also the business world – we have started a series on business and the environment and who climate change changes our way we do business. And we are running columns from people who are in investment area writing on how investment can have environmental impact. But on the other hand, we are not a campaigning organization. **We are an information organization.** And an organization that hopes to facilitate real dialogue and real idea sharing. All environmental issue are a legitimate subject of inquiry for us, including of course, very importantly business.

Q: What's the feed back on chinadialouge.net so far from the corporate world?

A: It's a little early to tell. But I have no reason to suppose that they would find it other than interesting. There is a very interesting trend going on in business schools, in the corporate world and in investment. The corporate world is catching on to environmental concerns in some way faster than the political world. Look at the insurance industry for instance or look at the concerns of the trans-national corporations who now realise that their environmental image is more and more important, as maybe the ethnical labour question was for Nike ten years ago. They have to address this! Promoting a constructive discussion in this is the only way. I mean this is not an antagonistic situation. We are just looking for solutions and for sharing these experiences.

Q: Looking at China now, do you think we are on time to win the environmental battle? Is there time to try to convince through dialogue?

A: I certainly do hope so... But I think we are running out of time. **The next ten to fifteen years are absolutely critical** in terms of the measures that need to be taken to avoid really catastrophic climate change. The Chinese are caught between the need for development and the need to take care of the environment. I think until five years ago, the attitude was pretty much “develop first and think of the environment later”. That has certainly changed. The crisis is now so visible that the government has become convinced of the need to do both: to develop sustainably, to build in much stricter environmental impact assessments. **Making that happen across China is a challenge of governance** and that's a whole other side of issues: how you turn this oil tanker around...

Q: Isn't that the real problem: how to implement “green” laws on a regional and local level in the most populated country in the world, based on a political system

that does not provide transparency and freedom to control accurate implementation?

A: It is indeed. It will be interesting how the Chinese state tries to make it happen. And I think we all know the problems of putting policy into practice in China. And it's not just in this sector, it's in many sectors. It's the problem of having a very recently constructed legal state, and a legal state that does not entirely function, problems of political control, problems of legitimacy, all these problems are there and the Chinese state has to grapple with. But one thing that will help the Chinese state to grapple with is the degree to which they can use technology to address environmental concerns in a constructive way.

Q: Isn't it difficult to expect that in a society where we start to observe the same pattern of environmentally insane consumerism like the West?

A: Yes, but where do they learn it from I wonder...

Q: Have we given such a bad example?

A: Oh, yes! And it's worth pointing out that the emission standards on Chinese cars are very high, much higher than in the United States.

Q: Yes, but still, the idea of only half of China's population driving around is scary.

A: Of course it's scary – because of the numbers. But we have to step back a bit: do we say because there are so many of them they have to stay poor? This is an impossible position. And it's a position from which there is no dialogue possible. Of course the Chinese aspire higher living standards, we must be realistic about what the cost on the present model will be. But let's look at how we can allow the Chinese their cars without destroying the planet that they live on as well as us.

The good thing about China's rise is that there is all to do in China and the smartest part of the Western corporate world is aware of that challenge and the need of innovative solutions.

Where else are they building new cities from scratch? Where else are they building entire new sectors? If we can insure, persuade, encourage those sectors to be green, or that these new cities are eco-cities... That would be a unique opportunity to pioneer this kind of technology and demonstration technology as models for what we in the West will be doing. They are actually building cities – we are not building cities here in the UK and I doubt you building entire new cities in Spain. There is one interesting project called **Dongtan**, which is to be **the world's first eco-city on Chongming Island** (*near Shanghai, designed and engineered by the Arup/UK*), which could be an extraordinary place and an extraordinary model. And that's where we ought to be looking because the most far-sighted investors, engineers and scientists have a unique opportunity in China to put their ideas into practice.

Q: How does chinadialogue.net work as a website?

A: It's published bilingual. We have an office in London and a team in Beijing. The great challenge was to find Chinese writers, writers who were prepared to join this experiment, as well as non-Chinese writers who have to say something to the Chinese. It's really an exciting editorial experiment.

Q: Has your Beijing team experienced any problems with censorship so far? How do you tackle this issue?

A: So far we have not had problems with censorship and we don't really anticipate it. That said, I think when you run a website in Chinese, accessible in China and you hope that it will stay open you have to be aware of the Chinese government regulations and it would be foolish to defy them. They are there, that's the reality to deal with.

Q: What does this mean in practical terms for your editing work?

A: We would not consider not to write about a certain issue but we would consider how we write about it. It's a judgement call. We don't make these rules but they are there.

Q: Where and how do you establish the dialogue through the web? Is there real interaction between the experts and readers?

A: One of the most challenging parts at chinadialogue.net was the idea is to run a fully bilingual forum. Which means that if you only speak one language you can post in your language and your post will be translated. You really can have a conversation despite the language barrier. And we encourage the writers of the articles to respond all comments on their articles. We have volunteers that do the translations, the collaborative element to it is very important. Financially it would be impossible to have staff for the translations... We are trying to create a community here, so what people bring to this community is, for example, four hours of translation a day for the forum, being part of it. The interesting thing about setting up this network of volunteers is that people really want this dialogue to happen.

Q: Chinadialogue.net has only recently started editing so where does the journey go to?

A: We want to grow. If you look at the map of where people are accessing from it goes from the West coast of America all across the States, UK, Europe, Africa, Australia and all across China. So we have already done something, which is one of the fundamental aims of chinadialogue.net, building a global digital network that includes China. I would like it to be the place where you come to read about these issues, to find a like-minded community, a real global community on these issues, come to argue and to discuss and talk about difficult things as well. Because the principal is that it is possible and desirable to discuss difficult and controversial issues. If we can really host large and extensive discussions and establish connections, enable people in China to get a different perspective on the outside world and people from outside China to understand China, I think than we would feel succeeded. To give you a small example: just the other night I was talking to someone about the Al Gore movie (*An Inconvenient Truth* directed by Davis Guggenheim) which I went to see, and the person I was talking to about it – an intelligent, well informed person – said “ It’s all very well urging us to change our life styles but you know, China and India really don’t care, do they?” And I said: “**Actually** they care quite a lot!” And you know, that’s the kind of person that should be reading chinadialogue.net. Because **as long as people think there is no point in doing anything about climate change because India and China don’t care they don’t act.** And that’s a fundamental and very common misconception! China does care about climate change because China is in the front line of climate change. And what we have to understand is the way in which they care and the possibility of their actions. And at the same time be a little self-critical.

Q: I sometimes have the feeling that even people who have been to China hold on to these misconceptions? Many of them come back scared and concerned...

A: Most of the international conflicts and misconceptions come out of mutual fear. Just as the people in the West are afraid of China, people in China are afraid of the West, like for example that the West has intentions to sabotage China’s prosperity and to try to control China like they did it in the nineteenth century. So there are fears and misconceptions on both sides. But this is just too important to allow misconceptions and fears to go unchallenged.

Q: Apart from project like yours, what else do we have to do to bring Europe and China closer, and not only in business-terms?

A: To have a much richer, and more multi-facet engagement with China, I think we need more school exchanges, we need contact at many, many different levels – a business relationship is just not rich enough! China is joining the world very rapidly and it’s a very steep learning curve, both for China and for the world. If we want that to go well then there’s going to be a lot of adjustments on both sides. China will have to learn to be a multilateral player, to take a more constructive approach to a whole range of issues, which are of international concern. And the west is going to have to accept that China is a very big power indeed. And you have to make room.

Thank you very much for the interview!